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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2335
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9849
RUEHKU/AMEMBASSY KUWAIT PRIORITY 0273
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0821
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 0391
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000988

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [KTIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE: BANGLADESHI
DEPORTEES FROM KUWAIT.

REF: KUWAIT 954

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary =====

¶1. (C) Following the deportation of nearly 1200 Bangladeshis alleged to have participated in violent strikes in Kuwait, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) reacted by sending the Foreign Affairs Adviser on an official visit; he encouraged the Government of Kuwait (GOK) to compensate the workers. The GOB also increased scrutiny of local recruiters. NGOs remain dissatisfied, however, contending that the GOB has not acted as quickly or as forcefully as they would have liked. Both parties concur that the workers, grievances are legitimate. Though these are encouraging signs, concrete progress is still yet to be achieved and the fundamental imbalance in the Kuwait-Bangladesh relationship suggests that long term change will be slow to come.

Tales of victimization =====

¶2. (C) Migrant workers have reiterated to PolOff in recent conversations, media reports of mistreatment by employers in Kuwait. Returnees complained of being underpaid, receiving no salary increases, irregular payments, long working hours and poor living conditions. Many claimed that they had been forced to sign new contracts in Arabic upon their arrival in Kuwait. They also returned home with little or no compensation for their time abroad and heavily in debt because of the money they had to borrow to go overseas.

¶3. (C) NGOs also spoke of excessive force used by the police in Kuwait and contend that the majority of deported workers were residing in Kuwait legally and not involved in the violence. They allege that after the strikes, the Kuwaiti security forces carried out mass raids against Bangladeshi workers in the middle of the night, targeting them without any regard for guilt or innocence.

Finding common ground with Kuwait =====

¶4. (C) In a meeting at the Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriates, Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE), the Joint Secretary agreed that most of the workers, claims were legitimate but denied that the Government of Kuwait (GOK) had conducted a campaign of mass arrests or that the numbers of returnees was alarmingly high. He stated that only those involved in the agitations and others who had overstayed their visas had been deported, noting that approximately 100-200 Bangladeshi workers return from overseas every day.

(Note: Kuwait is home to roughly 230,000 Bangladeshi workers and is the third largest recipient of Bangladeshi migrant labor after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. End Note.)

Advocating for workers, cracking down on recruiters

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¶5. (C) Reflecting on the visit of Foreign Affairs Adviser Chowdhury, the Joint Secretary suggested that Chowdhury struck a conciliatory tone by asking the GOK to consider compensating the deported workers. The Joint Secretary added that the GOB response was reasonable given the circumstances and that the Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait had worked with the Ministry to advocate on behalf of the workers. MEWOE had also been in regular contact with the Kuwaiti Embassy in Bangladesh. The Joint Secretary admitted that because Bangladesh was a supplier of unskilled labor, it had less bargaining power with respect to foreign governments.

¶6. (C) NGOs report that several arbitration cases against Bangladeshi recruiters are also currently pending before the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), a department of MEWOE which regulates recruiting agencies. If found guilty of engaging in unfair practices, the companies could be forced to refund the entire recruitment fee paid by workers. (Note: workers typically pay a fee of up to \$3,500 to recruiting agencies who secure their job and visa. End note.) The Joint Secretary also pointed out that in this year alone, 30 recruiters had their license suspended and 15 had it dismissed for illegal recruiting practices, out of a total of 772 license holders.

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Waiting for results

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¶7. (C) Local NGOs regard GOB efforts as not enough, arguing that Embassy officials in Kuwait were corrupt and ineffective and that the Foreign Affairs Adviser's visit took place well after the problems had occurred. These groups agree that efforts are being made but would like to see workers be fully compensated; the groups maintained that Bangladesh did have bargaining power given the need for labor in the Gulf countries.

Comment

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¶8. (C) Extensive media coverage of the deportees, plight and increased focus on TIP issues has led the GOB to take action in this matter. Post will continue to urge the government to continue its efforts to redress the grievances of these workers and better regulate local recruiters. Additionally, USAID/Bangladesh is about to launch a new anti-TIP agreement that will work directly with BMET and the Government to start tackling these issues. The GOB clearly wants to move forward on this issue but is reluctant to take a tougher stance. Ultimately, Bangladesh's heavy reliance on foreign remittances and its status as an exporter of unskilled labor, means that its bargaining position vis--vis the Gulf states will be weak.

Moriarty